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The Limits of Solidarity: Leftist Jewish Israeli Activism for Palestine in the 1960s and 2010s

Ryann M. Hubbart University of Iowa What does it mean for Jewish Israelis to engage in Palestinian solidarity? How do they navigate their positions of privilege in their activism? To explore these questions, I begin with a historical trajectory of the rise and fall of leftist Jewish Israeli activist organizations in response to global and local developments. I focus on two periods and their organizations: The Israeli Socialist Organization in the 1960's and 1970's and Ta'ayush and Physicians for Human Rights Israel in the 2010's. In both cases the individuals in question are a very small minority of Israelis. From there I analyze these organizations and activists' struggles to escape dominant Zionist and Israeli state narratives and the continual shortcomings in their attempts to center Palestinians in their activism. Despite radical positions, activists from both eras remain trapped in existing systems of power.

The first radical anti-Zionist critique emerged in 1962 when the Israeli Socialist Organization, known by the name of its publication, Matzpen ("compass"), broke from the Israeli Communist Party. Previously the most radical leftist organizations in Israel had adopted a stance of non-Zionism. Matzpen went further. Deviating from dominant discourse on the Left and within Israeli society more broadly, these activists put Zionism in explicitly colonial terms. It was not a clash of nations, as the prevailing narrative put it (and often still does), but an imperial and colonial program that was the source of conflict in Israel/Palestine. Alongside anti-Zionism, their other central tenet was naturally, as a leftist organization, anti-capitalism. In their rhetoric and activism, they fought against the combined enemies of Zionism, imperialism, and "Arab reaction," referring to Palestinian retaliation against Zionism and imperialism that had a

¹ Wright, The Israeli Radical Left, 14.

² Greenstein, Zionism and Its Discontents, 166.

nationalistic and anti-Semitic character. Only regional revolution could escape from these three and liberate the workers of Israel, Palestine, and the larger Middle East.³

Their envisioned future was one of self-determination for all nations in the region – of which they saw a non-imperial, minority Jewish nation as a part. However, they recognized that before equal national self-determination could become a reality, the colonial expansion of a Jewish nation-state needed to end.⁴ This required the "de-Zionization" of Israel: removing colonial and imperial expansionist elements of government and society. Most of their activism centered on this idea of de-Zionization until 1967. The 1967 war between Israel, Jordan, and the United Arab Republic (present-day Egypt and Syria) ended in Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, the Golan Heights, and the Sinai Peninsula. With this major change, Matzpen activism reoriented to opposition to the occupation. It was also during this post-1967 period that the group garnered the most fame and notoriety. ⁵ They made connections with leftist organizations in Europe and at times Matzpen's key members were based there. ⁶

Internal and external changes in the next decade weakened the organization. Division within Matzpen led to break away groups in 1970. Some members argued that Matzpen was too nationally focused at the expense of a truly radical leftist critique. Others said that the organization was overly concerned with the theoretical instead of the Palestinian reality. These two opposing poles – national support and socialism – continued tugging on the fabric of the organization. In 1972 it split geographically into Matzpen Tel Aviv and Matzpen Jerusalem

³ Greenstein, 168.

⁴ Greenstein, 168.

⁵ Greenstein, 170.

⁶ Matzpen, Anti Zionist Israelis. Full Film with English Subtitles.

⁷ Greenstein, Zionism and Its Discontents, 172-173.

(known as "Matzpen Marxist").⁸ While initially their frameworks remained the same, over time Matzpen Marxist adopted harsher rhetoric for the "destruction of the Zionist state," and became more concerned with wider Arab revolution.⁹ Within Israel, much of the Israeli working class began moving to the political right and supported the government of Menachem Begin. The death of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1970 eroded regional support for Arab nationalism. The Camp David Accords and Oslo Accords improved Israel's diplomatic position and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) became more open to compromise. ¹⁰ Israelis, including Matzpen activists, saw a period of hope in the post-Oslo era that was shattered by an eventual recognition that the accords further benefitted Israel at the expense of Palestinian dispossession.¹¹ Nonetheless, in this environment "the call for the 'destruction of the Zionist state' began to look increasingly anachronistic".¹² Matzpen's platform was founded on class struggle and regional revolution. The decline in support for both, domestically and internationally, impaired an organization already weakened by internal division.¹³

In the face of internal and external complications, Matzpen activism lost momentum. In his book on radical dissent in Israel/Palestine, Ran Greenstein argues,

[o]nly a few hardcore 'professional revolutionaries' would be able to sustain activities on a regular basis, for a prolonged period of time, under such conditions. The rest would likely become disillusioned and retire from political life – the cycle of intense involvement leading to 'burn out' feeling and ultimately to withdrawal is quite common – or seek a different mode of activism.¹⁴

⁸ Greenstein, 182.

⁹ Greenstein, 184-185.

¹⁰ Greenstein, 189.

¹¹ Matzpen, Anti Zionist Israelis. Full Film with English Subtitles.

¹² Greenstein, Zionism and Its Discontents, 189.

¹³ Greenstein, 190.

¹⁴ Greenstein, 190.

Over the next decade the organization's support and action diminished. Smaller groups replaced Matzpen. This new wave of movements grew after the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, the 1982 Lebanon War, and the Sabra and Shatila massacre. Opposition to these wars, disillusionment with the 1993 Oslo Accords, and the Second Intifada brought many leftist Jewish Israelis back into Palestinian solidarity activism. A humanitarian focus replaced the broad leftist political manifesto of Matzpen. These new groups involved many of the same activists with similarly leftist politics, yet the organizations themselves took on much smaller problems.

It is these organizations, including Ta'ayush and Physicians for Human Rights Israel, that I examine in the second period, 2010-2011 Tel Aviv-Jaffa. Ta'ayush is a group of Jewish Israeli activists who, at the time of Fiona Wright's ethnographic research, worked to protect the rights of farmers in the occupied South Hebron Hills.¹⁷ Activists would travel there, only possible because of Israeli settlements in the area, to physically "stand with" Palestinian farmers who faced harassment by Israeli settlers and soldiers. While not engaging directly with these other Israelis, the activists would record and document abuses.¹⁸ Physicians for Human Rights Israel (PHRI) is an organization that works for human rights, in particular the right to medical services for Palestinians, refugees, and migrants in Israel and the Occupied Territories. They conduct research, write reports, and run free clinics.¹⁹ At the time Wright was researching and working with the group there was an ongoing wave of resistance and backlash towards the increasing numbers of refugees coming from Sudan and the Horn of Africa. Upon entering Israel, refugees and migrants would be detained by Israeli authorities, bussed to the south of Tel Aviv-Jaffa, and

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¹⁵ Wright, The Israeli Radical Left, 15.

¹⁶ Greenstein, Zionism and Its Discontents, 192.

^{17 &}quot;About Ta'ayush « Taayush."

¹⁸ Wright, *The Israeli Radical Left*, 30.

^{19 &}quot;About Us."

left to fend for themselves. Political, humanitarian, and human rights organizations like PHRI took on the task of support for these groups unsupported by the state.²⁰ Alongside these organizations were and are other grassroots groups who lead protests and demonstrations against police and government action like the displacement of Palestinians in neighborhoods like Sheikh Jarrah.

Many modern leftist, anti-Zionist organizations can trace their origins back to Matzpen. Many are made up of former members of the group, or were influenced by Matzpen's anti-Zionist position. Yet these two periods of analysis are not just connected through lineage. Many of the problems and limitations of Matzpen's Palestinian solidarity are the same problems that present-day leftist Jewish Israelis struggle with. Leftist Jewish Israeli activism in solidarity with Palestinians is a confrontation with their identity as Jewish Israelis. In attempting to reject the nation-state of Israel *as* Jewish Israelis, for whom the state has been created and in whose name it exists, these individuals are also rejecting themselves. As the following examples will show, despite attempts otherwise, leftist Jewish Israeli activists are unable to distance themselves from the state and society they critique. Because of this close relationship, they are at risk of centering their activism in an intra-Israeli context and othering and decentering the Palestinians they aim to support.

Regarding French settlers in Tunisia, Albert Memmi wrote in 1957 in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*,

It is not easy to escape mentally from a concrete situation, to refuse its ideology while continuing to live with its actual relationships. From now on, [the colonizer] lives his life under the sign of a contradiction which looms at every step...How

²⁰ Wright, The Israeli Radical Left, 92.

can he go about freeing himself of this halo of prestige which crowns him and at which he would like to take offense? ²¹

Leftist Jewish Israeli activists are in a similarly dissonant position, embedded in the society they seek to radically transform, if not end. In the documentary *Matzpen: Anti Zionist Israelis*, Elfi Pallis, a former Matzpen activist said,

Israel during the 60's was very different than today [2003]. A person with universal and humanitarian values who believed that all citizens should be treated as equals did not have a political base in the country, in certain respects. There was a national consensus that no questions are asked.²²

When, as a young kibbutz volunteer, Michael Warschawski asked about Palestinian refugees that he saw leaving the area near the settlement, his leader responded that they were simply moving elsewhere. Warschawski, reflecting more than 3 decades later, recognizes that he had no political consciousness to know otherwise. Similarly, one activist and healthcare worker that Wright interviewed in 2010 said that "books published in the 1980's by so-called post-Zionist scholars...led him to reconsider the history of Israel as he knew it". To grow up and exist in this context, these activists are forever tied to the dominant rhetoric and narratives of the state. These narratives bleed over into their activism even as they seek to distance themselves from.

Activists in Matzpen and contemporary organizations are constrained by positioning themselves as antithetical to a dominant Israeli narrative. Moshe Machover, one of the founders of Matzpen, speaking about support for the PLO as "the accepted official representative [of the Palestinians], for better or worse," said that they "had to…not look at [the PLO] in the foolish, ridiculous outlook of the time, that they're a herd of terrorists and there's no one to talk to". ²⁵ He

²¹ Memmi, The Colonizer and the Colonized, 20.

²² Matzpen, Anti Zionist Israelis. Full Film with English Subtitles.

²³ Matzpen, Anti Zionist Israelis. Full Film with English Subtitles.

²⁴ Wright, *The Israeli Radical Left*, 74.

²⁵ Matzpen, Anti Zionist Israelis. Full Film with English Subtitles.

justifies support for an organization that he was not "enthusiastic about" by placing it as a counter to the Israeli right's narrative. By positioning themselves as counter to a dominant Israeli narrative, what decolonial potential does their activism and framework miss?

Similarly, Warschawski, reflecting on his time as a kibbutz volunteer says, "I saw an image of [Palestinian] refugees and it's always the same, from the *Exodus from Egypt*, up till today, till Kosovo, it always looks the same". He makes a rhetorical choice to associate the experience of Palestinian refugees displaced in the Nakba with the biblical Jewish exodus from Egypt. He takes a common element of Zionist justification – Jewish narratives of exodus and return to Israel – and flips it on its head by relating it to Palestinians. Whether Warschawski is 'flipping the script' in a radical way or simply resorting to common Israeli rhetorical tools is up for debate, although the casual use of the phrase in an interview suggests the latter.

Problems of recreating or relying on dominant Israeli narratives exist in the recent past as well. When the free clinic run by the PHRI was overwhelmed and underfunded, activists contemplated the problems and benefits of using the state narrative of Israel as a land of refugees to bolster support for their work for non-Jewish refugee communities. These individuals are aware of the hypocrisy of this narrative vis a vis Palestinians and Palestinian refugees and of their role in justifying state policy by utilizing this narrative. Yet, "they chose to continue, 'just now,' with this form of engagement". ²⁷ Ta'ayush's reporting on soldier and settler harassment and violence toward Palestinians in the South Hebron Hills also relies on dominant narratives. In one publication they critiqued Israeli soldiers saying, "don't just say you're following orders," referencing the defense of Adolf Eichmann. ²⁸ By critiquing the actions of Jewish soldiers and

²⁶ Matzpen, Anti Zionist Israelis. Full Film with English Subtitles. Emphasis added

²⁷ Wright, *The Israeli Radical Left*, 92.

²⁸ Wright, 34.

settlers using the language of the state, they "partially shift...attention from what the Palestinians face to ethical and political relations among different Jewish Israelis".²⁹ In another example, despite activists' critique of the ways that the Israeli state uses particular Jewish deaths as part of its political agenda, they did the same when mourning for Palestinians.³⁰ Martyrdom and the application of martyrdom is a subject of debate in a Palestinian context as well³¹, however, the Jewish activists who utilize Palestinian death for rhetorical and political purposes are specifically doing so in relation to the way Jewish death is used by the state.

Jewish Israeli activists then and now must also grapple with a victim-perpetrator binary.

Matzpen activists had to counteract a narrative of Jews as victims and thus not perpetrators.

About this issue Matzpen member Akiva Orr says:

A great deal of...blackmail is carried out through the self-image of being a victim. 'I'm a victim, I'm pitiful, it's your fault that I'm a victim. You owe me, I'm not responsible for anything you're responsible for everything. I'm not because I'm the victim.' Matzpen said: No! You're not the victim! The Palestinians are the victim, and you are the ones who are making them the victim.³²

While Orr appears to still rely on a binary distinction between victim and perpetrator, Jewish Israeli activists for Palestine had to address this issue of two parties (Jewish and Palestinian) who are both, in different ways, victims of violence, death, and displacement. This is further complicated by the position of Arab/Mizrahi Jews in Israel. For Yemeni, Iraqi, Egyptian, and other Jewish immigrants to Israel from Arab and Muslim-majority countries, the conditions of their emigration and arrival is tied up with violence and racism within Jewish Israeli society. ³³ The responsibility of these groups towards Palestinians and other non-Jewish victims of the

²⁹ Wright, 36.

³⁰ Wright, 70.

^{31 &}quot;There Is A Field."

³² Matzpen, Anti Zionist Israelis. Full Film with English Subtitles.

³³ Ariel, "Jewish-Muslim Relations and Migration from Yemen to Palestine in the Late Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries"; Bashkin, *New Babylonians*; Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry*.

Israeli state (like present-day migrants and refugees from Africa) is ambiguous. How Ashkenazi Jewish activists are to engage with these two wounded groups (Palestinian and Mizrahi) or their own group is also unclear. As Wright puts it, this is a context with "multiple layers of woundedness – that of Mizrahi Israelis, of Palestinians, of non-Jewish refugees arriving in Israel, and of the historical persecution of Jews". This uncertain landscape is once again connected to Israeli national discourse where "discrete layers of violence throughout Israeli history were muted in *a discursive sphere that mostly responds to wounds with a clear-cut victim/perpetrator distinction*". So

Speaking on the in-between position of Italian, Spanish, and Maltese immigrants in French Tunisia Albert Memmi argued that "privilege is something relative". While white, European settlers to French Tunisia experienced class- and nationality- based discrimination, they still benefitted from shared race, religion, language, etc. Whether Mizrahi or Ashkenazi, Jewish Israeli activists exist in a privileged position. These activists have to grapple with the reality that, while still taking a risk, they risk *less* than Palestinians. Matzpen's notoriety post-1967 attracted a lot of hatred. Yet, "Matzpen's Jewish members mostly suffered from spontaneous harassment during protests and threats" while "Matzpen's Arab members suffered from methodical harassment by the state in the form of interrogations and arrests". At protests in 2010 and 2011, Jewish Israeli activists expressed having some degree of choice over getting arrested. Those who were willing went to the front and confronted soldiers, police, and counter-protestors, while those who, for whatever reason, personal or political, were less willing

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³⁴ Wright, *The Israeli Radical Left, 118*.

³⁵ Wright, 118, emphasis added.

³⁶ Memmi, The Colonizer and the Colonized, 11.

³⁷ Matzpen, Anti Zionist Israelis. Full Film with English Subtitles.

³⁸ Wright, The Israeli Radical Left, 36.

to risk arrest stayed towards the back. Jewish Israelis were able to approach soldiers and engage in legal battles because they knew they risked less and were favored by the system. Wright witnessed judgement among activists of fellow Jewish Israelis who were not willing to be arrested. For them, to not directly or physically challenge was to be more complicit. However, from another angle, arrest was a badge of honor.³⁹ What does it mean to utilize your privilege or to be an activist while a member of a group privileged by the state and dominant society?

The above example of the significance of arrest brings up a question of the absolution of guilt through activism. Matzpen activist Haim Hanegbi reflected on his activism, "If I reach the gates of Heaven and am asked: 'is there something you're proud of?' I'll say: Yes. The determined, unmistakable and clear opposition to the war, to the occupation. No doubts, no hesitation. Our call to immediately withdrawal from all the occupied territories, unconditionally".⁴⁰ The implication of his words is that he is in some way absolved of the guilt (or sin) of being a member of the oppressive group *through* his work with Matzpen.

For the activists in 2010 and 2011, this idea of release from ethical complicity was most discussed in the context of emigration from Israel. If you recognize yourself as a colonizing force whose presence (in combination with the violence of the state) is the source of the oppression of the Indigenous people, a clear ethical choice would be to leave that setting. However, the option of emigration itself is a privilege. The activists in question are largely Ashkenazi and have foreign passports or the means to acquire them and language skills that make emigration feasible. Other Israelis, Palestinian citizens of Israel, and especially Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are not granted this same right to leave.⁴¹ At the end of the play "There is a Field," Nardim

³⁹ Wright, 44.

⁴⁰ Matzpen, Anti Zionist Israelis. Full Film with English Subtitles.

⁴¹ Wright, The Israeli Radical Left, 121.

Asleh argues that choosing to stay (implying an option to emigrate) in Israel/Palestine is her form of resistance as a Palestinian citizen of Israel.⁴² If her resistance was choosing to remain, how does this alter the ethics of a Jewish Israeli's decision to stay or go? If the personal/psychological goal of emigration is to "put an end to [the colonizer's] contradiction and uneasiness," then this ease of conscience is not the outcome.⁴³

Rather, practical possibility of escaping these circumstances are discussed, debated, and sometimes put into action when activists indeed decide to emigrate, but these possibilities are always found wanting as they fail to provide the moral wholeness and coherence that the rejection of violence often seems to offer.⁴⁴

The sites of immigration likely lack an awareness of the multilayered reality of life in Israel/Palestine (for example, regarding the Mizrahi/Ashkenazi issue described above). In such a circumstance, activists may be pushed "into a corner of feeling the need to explain, historicize, and educate as well as even perhaps to defend slightly the social and political processes going on inside the country." Thus, they are "pushed into a position of identification with the state, the very state from which they have acted to disconnect". ⁴⁵

Lastly, Memmi suggested that the reality of colonized resistance to colonialism will often be in opposition to the political beliefs that bring the colonizer into solidarity with the colonized. How, for instance, is the colonizer who rejects the colonial system on the basis of humanism to reconcile with violent resistance? The beliefs that bring leftist Jewish Israelis into Palestinian solidarity similarly may contradict with the reality of the people, groups, and leaders they intend to support. This is seen most obviously with Matzpen. Akiva Orr rejected a bi-national (two-state) future for Israel/Palestine on the grounds that it was based on a false belief in distinct

⁴² "There Is A Field."

⁴³ Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 44.

⁴⁴ Wright, *The Israeli Radical Left*, 121.

⁴⁵ Wright, 135.

ethnic divisions (that of Palestinians and Jews). 46 The group's European connections and leftist internationalist politics put it in a position that was not in obvious accord with prevailing Palestinian platforms. This is upfront in comments from Warschawski on leading Palestinian organizations:

For people who define themselves as leftists: total conditional identification with the occupied people, regardless of their policy, leadership, or strategy. Unconditional identification with the occupied people. Also, support of the political powers that represent the occupied people, regardless of our approval or disapproval, if our approval is even relevant, of its strategy, tactics, methods. It...they...Today I say they, meaning the PLO, we used to say the Fatah, the Popular Front, the Democratic Front, they represent the Palestinian people and their struggle for liberation and we are with them.⁴⁷

According to Warschawski, Matzpen is to unconditionally support the Palestinian leadership and its policies, even as these elements are constantly changing, at times contradictory, and debated within Palestinian activism.

Even when sharing the same political foundations, there were stark differences in approach between Matzpen and the Palestinian groups it supported, as seen in the Ma'alot incident. On May 15, 1974 three members of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), a secular, leftist organization, embarked on a mission into Israel "with a plan to capture hostages for bargaining." In the process "between 18 and 21 students...died...and 71 people [were] injured". Three adults and the three DFLP members were also killed. In the aftermath, Matzpen published an open letter to DFLP, including the following lines:

We can...attest that your operation has dealt a severe blow to many in the left-Zionist camp, sincere rank-and-file members. They had been led by recent events...to a better understanding and greater willingness to seek allies among the Palestinian Arab people. They were ready to lend an ear to different voices in the Arab world in general and among the Palestinian Arab people in particular, and some of them had been moving towards revolutionary positions while being

⁴⁶ Matzpen, Anti Zionist Israelis. Full Film with English Subtitles.

⁴⁷ Matzpen, Anti Zionist Israelis. Full Film with English Subtitles.

⁴⁸ "1974."

willing to abandon Zionist positions. Your existence played a part in this development. Therefore, the knowledge that your organization is responsible for the operation in Ma'alot was a resounding slap in the face for them...The history of our era is replete with examples of spontaneous eruptions of oppressed masses, rising up and killing their oppressors. The Ma'alot operation is not of this kind. It was not spontaneous. It was planned and calculated... In your Ma'alot operation you disregarded elementary moral principles. This disregard cannot hide behind the – admittedly common – claim that these are bourgeois principles. We cannot accept this claim; because the standards that apply to a spontaneous outburst of an oppressed mass, or to nationalist liberation fighters, are not appropriate to fighters bearing weapons in the name of the socialist revolution.⁴⁹

In this open letter they critique the DFLP on the basis of a shared Marxism, but also notably for damaging their appeal to Israelis predisposed to their position. This is yet another example of Matzpen placing their activism in an explicitly intra-Israeli political context. Yet, they go even further by applying that positioning onto DFLP.

I do not agree with Memmi's conclusion that these divisions and conflicting politics that bring people to the movement are irreconcilable. Disagreement over tactics, strategies, and desired outcomes are just some of numerous points of conflict within any movement. To suggest that the politics and beliefs of settlers and of indigenous people resisting a colonial power are *uniquely* irreconcilable creates two homogenous sides out of a complex mix of ideologies, motivations, and identities. However, these examples show that solidarity politics are not straightforward. Many of the Matzpen activists, rightly, express a hesitancy to take issue with tactics and strategies of a movement that is not *theirs*. Addressing these issues of divergence as a privileged outsider is difficult to navigate.

These critiques of radical Jewish Israeli activism for Palestine are not intended to devalue what were and are radical and disruptive positions. Palestinian activist Wassim Abdullah said of

⁴⁹ "Open Letter to the Members of the Democratic Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine."

meeting Matzpen founder Moshe Machover, "At the time it was like...a breath of fresh air to hear someone from so-called the opposite side who is really anti-Zionist, not just talk, that could explain the events and the historical situation, what happened to the Palestinians the same way that we understood it". ⁵⁰ For Khalil Hawatmeh, another Palestinian activist,

There is no doubt in my mind that Matzpen was one of the great influences on the thinking of the Palestinian Left. It helped de-demonize the enemy...it went to show a number of people that it is possible to find descent people amongst the Israelis with whom you can have a dialogue, with whom you can even have a common front.⁵¹

Nayef Hawatmeh, a former DFLP secretary who was personally called out in Matzpen's open letter, said in 2003, "We regarded Matzpen as a member of the common struggle in the problems of our two people". State comments by these Palestinian activists show, Matzpen and its successor organizations on the Israeli radical left were disruptive and valuable movements. Yet even radical, decolonial positions remain plagued by issues of privilege and get trapped in dominant narratives and systems of power despite the best efforts of activists. There is no escape from this complicity. However, complicity, to use Wright's definition, is a problem of entanglement and not "an accusation or judgement of failure". The idea of making room for negativity and violence in our conceptions of the ethical, for leaving its ambiguities unresolved, offers a way for us to imagine potential forms of engagement and activism that would not require piety or purity in order to be considered legitimate or, simply, necessary". States

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⁵⁰ Matzpen, Anti Zionist Israelis. Full Film with English Subtitles.

⁵¹ Matzpen, Anti Zionist Israelis. Full Film with English Subtitles.

⁵² Matzpen, Anti Zionist Israelis. Full Film with English Subtitles.

⁵³ Wright, *The Israeli Radical Left*, 150.

⁵⁴ Wright, 149.

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